



# The Wilsonian Moment in East Asia: The March First Movement in Global Perspective

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## **The “Wilsonian Moment” in East Asia: The March First Movement in Global Perspective**

Erez Manela, Harvard University

In the early dawn hours of March 1, 1919, a manifesto was posted along the main street of Seoul. Prepared by a group of students, the text described the suffering of the Korean people under Japanese rule since 1905, and blamed a Japanese plot for the recent death of the former Korean emperor. It then concluded: “Since the American President proclaimed the Fourteen Points, the voice of national self-determination has swept the world. ... How could we, the people of the great Korean nation, miss this opportunity? ... Now is the great opportunity to reform the world and recover us the ruined nation.” On the same morning, a Korean “Declaration of Independence,” signed by thirty-three prominent religious leaders, was announced. The declaration, which adopted Wilsonian language to assert Korea’s right to liberty and equality within the world of nations, was read aloud at Pagoda Park in downtown Seoul that morning in front of hundreds of cheering students; when the reading ended, they headed into the streets of the city shouting “long live an independent Korea.” Over the following months more than a million people participated in demonstrations and protests across Korea—the Japanese colonial police reported disturbances in all but seven of its 218 provinces. March First was the first mass protest of modern Korean nationalism, involving Koreans of every province, religion, class, and gender, and it marked a watershed in the evolution of Korean national identity and, more broadly, of modern Korean history.

It is of course possible and quite common to think of March First within the framework of Korean national history, preceded by the earlier resistance to the Japanese occupation and annexation and succeeded by the evolution of Korean nationalism to liberation, partition, and beyond. But, as an international historian, I am interested in viewing March First in a different context, within a different framework. That is, not as an episode in the timeline of Korean history, or of Japanese imperialism, but as part of a broader rise of anticolonial nationalism and resistance in the early twentieth century, and specifically as part of the singular anticolonial upsurge of the spring of 1919. If you look at March First in Korea and expand your frame of reference spatially rather than temporally, an extraordinary confluence of events comes into view: just as the student demonstrations that erupted in Seoul escalated into clashes with colonial authorities that lasted through the spring and reverberated throughout the century, similar street demonstrations erupted in Egypt less than ten days later, when the British occupiers tried to stifle rising nationalist agitation by sending its leader into exile. As in Korea, the Egyptian upheaval also began largely with students and spread rapidly across various sections of the population to become a mass movement bridging differences of class, religion, and gender. The disorder in Egypt, as in Korea, lasted through the spring; as in Korea, it became enshrined in the emerging national imagination as the “1919 Revolution”; and, as in Korea, its memory and influence has reverberated through the national psyche since and shaped the development of national identity and mythology.

And not only Egypt. In India, too, the month of March 1919 saw a buildup of frustration with India’s colonial masters. By the end of the month they found expression in the unprecedented mobilization of the masses across the land around the call of the rising star of the nationalist movement—Mahatma Gandhi—for passive resistance, or *satyagraha*. Again, the upheavals were massive and unprecedented and persisted throughout the spring, resulting most notoriously in the massacre of unarmed protesters in the city of Amritsar on April 13, 1919. Again, the events of 1919 became the foundry in which modern Indian national identity and mythology were forged. And of course, closest to Korea, the spring of 1919 was also a transformative moment in China.

Following the same pattern as in the other cases, the demonstrations famously began on May Fourth with Beijing’s students, but soon spread across space, class and gender to become the first mass mobilization of Chinese behind a modern nationalist agenda. Again, what began as protests against the specific injustice of the moment—the award, at the Paris Peace Conference, of the former German rights in Shandong Province to Japan

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Again, what began as protests against the specific injustice of the moment—the award, at the Paris Peace Conference, of the former German rights in Shandong Province to Japan—quickly became canonized in the Chinese national imagination as the May Fourth Movement, viewed in retrospect as heralding a revolution in Chinese identity, society, culture, language, literature, politics, ideology, and gender relations.

This, then, is the context of March First on which I would like to focus today—not its place in Korean national history, but rather within the broader colonial upheaval of 1919. I see the Korean case in this context as valuable both for comparative and for integrative purposes; that is, I argue we have something to learn both by comparing March First to other contemporaneous anticolonial upheavals; and also by integrating its story as part of the broader story of the Wilsonian moment in the colonial world.

Examining March First in its global context helps us to work out the details of one of the central processes of the history of the past century: how the global combined with the local to produce the national across a broad swath of humanity.

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The March First movement, like the other anticolonial upheavals of the spring of 1919, came in the wake of the Great European War, which, if measured by the death and destruction it sowed, was surely the greatest cataclysm in modern history. But the Korean experience was unusual among those of many other colonial peoples in that the European war had little direct impact on the population of the Korean peninsula. Korea did not experience the wartime economic hardships of Egypt; it did not contribute hundreds of thousands of troops to the Mesopotamian campaign like India, nor hundreds of thousands of laborers for the Western front, like China. But though Koreans were not significantly touched by the war in the material realm, they were affected by its ideological reverberations. As the war wore on and Allied leaders, led by Wilson, strained to endow the carnage with noble purposes—the liberation of small nations, equality, international justice—Korean nationalists began to see this vision of a new international order as an unprecedented opportunity to achieve a goal that had previously seemed remote: making Korea an independent, equal member in the modern community of nations.

Korean activists abroad, especially in the United States, took the lead in preparing to present the Korean claim for self-determination before the world. This was hardly unusual from a comparative perspective: colonial policies of suppression, censorship, and exile meant that most other anticolonial movements at the time also saw expatriate activists and communities play a role disproportionate to their numbers. This was perhaps all the more the case for Koreans, because of the unusually repressive policies of the Japanese colonial authorities, as well as by the prominent role of Korean Christians, who were more likely to live abroad, in the national movement. Although the Korean community in the United States, including Hawaii, numbered only about 6,000 at the time, it was politically active and organized as the Korean National Association, which had been formed in Hawaii in 1909. Even before the armistice was announced, the KNA resolved that, in light of Wilson's vision for the postwar settlement, a petition should be sent to the peace conference, and an appeal made to Wilson himself, to recognize Korean independence. Two activists, Syngman Rhee and Henry Chung (Chŏng Hangyŏng), were selected as delegates for the task. In December 1918, soon after the armistice, they set out to Washington, DC, to apply for passports and prepare for the trip to Paris.

Rhee, who would of course become the first president of South Korea after 1945, was already in 1919 a longtime activist for Korean independence. A Christian who was educated in a missionary school in Korea, Rhee was involved in the early modernization movement, the Independence Club, which opposed the conservative leanings of the imperial court and called for modernizing reforms that would allow Korea to resist foreign encroachment. Imprisoned for seven years when the movement was suppressed, he left for the United States upon his release in 1904. The following year he unsuccessfully petitioned President Theodore Roosevelt against allowing Korea to become a Japanese protectorate in the wake of the latter's victory over Russia. Rhee remained in the US, continuing to propagate the cause of Korean independence and in the meantime furthering his education. When he graduated with a Ph.D. from Princeton in 1910, he received his diploma from the then president of the University, Woodrow Wilson. As the war neared its end in 1918, then, Rhee was hardly new to working on behalf of his country's independence; but never before had the circumstances seemed so

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Koreans in China and Japan, in the meantime, had also been closely following international developments. When, in July 1918 Wilson proclaimed that his principles would apply not only to the peoples actually engaged in the war but to "many others also, who suffer under the mastery but cannot act; peoples of many races and in every part of the world," they, like Rhee, took this to mean that the days of Japanese rule over Korea were numbered. It was time to act. Drafting a petition that called on the United States to support the implementation of Wilson's principles in Korea, they deputed Kim Kyusik, a young Korean, to travel to Paris to present it officially to the Paris Peace Conference. An orphan who had been raised by an American missionary in Korea, Kim, like Rhee, was a Christian who had received an American education: a graduate of Roanoke College in Virginia and of Princeton, he taught at several Christian schools in Korea before leaving for China in 1913.

Once appointed Korean representative to the peace conference, Kim's first challenge was transport: how does a Korean fugitive get from Shanghai to Paris without falling into the hands of the Japanese police, which, among other things, had a formidable presence in Shanghai's international settlement? It took few months, but the problem was finally solved, and Kim was able to arrange passage with members of the Chinese delegation to the peace conference. The Chinese, who were facing the threat of Japanese expansion in Shandong and elsewhere, were of course and glad for the opportunity to embarrass Japan at the international forum, and indeed, several top Chinese leaders at the time, including Sun Yat-sen, told U.S. diplomats that the peace conference should take up the question of Korean independence. To avoid capture by the Japanese Kim obtained a Chinese passport and made the journey under a Chinese name.

As Kim was gingerly making his way to Europe, Korean students in Tokyo were also moved to act by the sense of opportunity that permeated the new international atmosphere. Ironically, they could do so more easily than their compatriots in Korea itself: censorship was far looser, and the Japanese home government, though hardly sympathetic to Korean demands, was somewhat less brutal in suppressing them than the colonial authorities on the peninsula. So the students decided to risk a radical stand: they would issue a formal declaration of independence in order to bring Korea's claims to the world: surely, with a new era dawning in world affairs, the Japanese government would be ready to entertain their demands. True to the global context in which it was conceived, copies of the declaration were sent to not only to Japanese politicians, scholars and newspapers, and to the Governor General in Korea, but also to Wilson, Clemenceau, and Lloyd George in Paris. In an act of defiance, the declaration was read publicly before a large crowd of Korean students at the YMCA in Tokyo on Feb 8, 1919. The reaction of the Japanese police, however, was hardly Wilsonian: the meeting was broken up, its organizers arrested, and the movement was quickly suppressed.

### **"Long Live Korean Independence!"**

Inspired by the Tokyo declaration and by news of the activities of their compatriots in the United States and China, community leaders and students inside Korea decided to take action. The unexpected death of the former Korean Emperor, who had been deposed by the Japanese in 1907, was an unplanned but propitious event for the organizers of the independence movement: rumors quickly spread that the emperor had been poisoned by the Japanese, and as some 200,000 Koreans streamed from the provinces into Seoul to pay their respects to the departed emperor, they could be more easily mobilized behind the call for independence. The planners decided to draft a Declaration of Independence and launch non-violent protests across the country that would demonstrate to the world their desire for self-determination and counter Japanese claims that Koreans were happy under foreign rule. At the same time, they would present petitions to the foreign representatives in Tokyo and send a letter to President Wilson personally asking for his

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The authors of the declaration of independence, which was signed by a group of thirty-three eminent religious leaders, presented it as part of “the worldwide movement for reform.” It celebrated a new global era, which would give Koreans “a great opportunity to recover our country and we move with a new current of world thought.” And as the Declaration was announced in Pagoda Park on March 1 and cheering demonstrators poured into the streets of Seoul, the organizers remained keenly aware that their most important audiences were located thousand of miles away, at the other end of the Eurasian landmass. One young participant recalled that on the morning of March 1 a student representative rose to address his fellow students: “Today we Koreans will declare our independence,” he told them. “Our representatives have gone to the Paris Peace Conference. To show our desire for independence to the world we must shout ‘manse’ [long live] for Korean independence.” A Canadian missionary, Dr. Frank Schofield, was asked that morning by one of the signatories of the Declaration to take pictures of the gathering in Pagoda Park to be sent to the peace conference. The Korean struggle for world opinion had begun in earnest.

Over the following months, as more than a million people participated in the protests that mobilized Koreans in an unprecedented fashion across lines of locale, class, religion, and gender. The uprising was fueled by the spread of rumors—the only conduit for news since Japanese censorship left few sources of reliable information—that the United States and President Wilson were supporting the Korean demands for self-determination. The rumors said, among other things, that “President Wilson was to come to Korea by airplane to assist Korean independence; that scores of United States battleships had been dispatched for Korea; that American troops had already landed at Inchon; that the peace conference had recognized the independence of Korea.” Another widespread story was that Wilson, before leaving for Paris, was approached by a Korean who asked him if Korea would be discussed at the peace conference. To this the president supposedly replied that if Koreans remained quiescent they would not be heard, but if they protested a hearing would be given.

With the protests spreading, the colonial authorities launched a brutal campaign of suppression that left thousands of casualties. They also, along with the Japanese press, blamed American influence for inciting Koreans, and most specifically American missionaries: after all, more than half of the thirty-three signatories to the Declaration of Independence were Korean Christians. The missionaries, charged the authorities, spread subversive Wilsonian propaganda in Korea, encouraging revolt. They even accused President Wilson of direct complicity: according to a Japanese police report, an American missionary, Shannon McCune, had gone to the United States in October 1918 and met with President Wilson, reached an understanding with him about the future of Korea, and upon his return, encouraged Korean to revolt in order to demonstrate to foreign countries that they rejected Japanese rule. Such, concluded the colonial police, “was the secret viewpoint of the ‘mystical president.’”

With accusations multiplying in the Japanese press and anti-American sentiment swelling, Washington grew concerned. The State Department, eager to preserve cordial ties with Japan, took great care to distance the United States from any appearance of support for, or involvement with, the Korean protests, and instructed its diplomats to warn missionary leaders against any such involvement. Under pressure from their own government, American missionaries in Korea at first vehemently denied any charges of complicity in the uprising. As the reports of Japanese atrocities multiplied, however, some missionaries, adopting the slogan “no neutrality for brutality,” appealed to the Japanese government to cease using violence against unarmed protesters. When these appeals met with little success the missionaries began to feed stories of Japanese atrocities to the press back home, aiming to produce a public outcry. The reports, which were widely disseminated in the United States and Europe, created a “public relations nightmare” for the Japanese and played a part in Tokyo’s decision in the summer of 1919

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### **“Spreading the True Facts about Korea”**

The popular uprising inside Korea in turn further mobilized nationalists abroad to action. In April, Korean leaders in Shanghai decided that the time has come for the next move toward independence, and announced the establishment the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea. Syngman Rhee, still in the United States, was appointed president in absentia, and Kim Kyusik, already in Paris attempting to get a hearing at the peace conference, was named foreign minister. Largely cut off from the peninsula, the provisional government governed little: its establishment was largely a symbolic act, intended to help bring the cause of Korean independence before world opinion. Rhee was quick to inform the State Department of the new government: Korea, he telegraphed, was now “a completely organized, self governed democratic State.” He addressed a copy of this announcement to Wilson himself, but, like most other communications from Korean nationalists, the president most likely never saw it: his secretary routed it directly to the State Department, where was filed away with the notation: “Do not acknowledge.” According to his biographer, Rhee was “thunderstruck to discover that his friend and hero, the architect of peace based upon justice, was planning to sacrifice Korean independence for the sake of power politics.”

The US position ignoring Korean claims boded ill for the efforts of Rhee and Chung, who were still waiting in Washington to receive permission to travel to the peace conference. When their petition was brought to the attention of Secretary of State Robert Lansing, he cabled from Paris that, since the United States had already recognized the annexation of Korea it would be “unfortunate” to have the Korean representatives in Paris demanding independence. The Department informed Rhee and Chung that, being Japanese subjects, they must request passports from the Japanese authorities. Such a request, everyone knew, would not be granted.

With his travel plans for Paris derailed, Rhee redoubled his efforts to advertise his cause in American opinion. With Philip Jaisohn, a Korean-American physician and longtime activist for the modernization and independence of Korea, he organized a conference of expatriate Korean organizations designed to attract public support for the Korean struggle. Held in Philadelphia, it was dubbed the “First Korean Congress,” in a very conscious effort to evoke associations with the Continental Congress that convened in that city nearly a century and a half before. Twenty-seven expatriate Korean organizations from the United States and Mexico sent representatives. “We called the Korean Congress,” Jaisohn declared in his opening address, “because we want America to realize that Korea is a victim of Japan. ... We believe that America will champion the cause of Korea as she has that of other oppressed people, once she knows the facts.”

One of the first acts of the Congress, which convened on April 14 in the Little Theatre on 17<sup>th</sup> and Delancey Streets, was to approve the text of “An Appeal to America,” prepared by a committee headed by Rhee. Echoing trademark Wilsonian concerns, the appeal described the Korean cause as anti-militaristic and democratic, as well as Christian: “Our cause is a just one before the laws of God and man. Our aim is freedom from militaristic autocracy; our object is democracy for Asia; our hope is universal Christianity.” The nature of an independent Korea was outlined in some detail: with its leaders trained under “American Christian influence” and imbued with “American democratic ideas,” it would assure freedom of religion, free commerce, free speech and press, education and health, and liberty of action. The government would derive its powers from the consent of the governed and be modeled after the United States, “as far as possible, consistent with the education of the masses.” In an eerie echo of Rhee’s authoritarian rule in the 1950s and 60s, the document frankly stated that at first centralized power may be called for, though it allowed that as the education of the people improved, their direct participation in government would increase.

The Congress participants were keen to show that Korea was a highly civilized nation, and therefore worthy of self-rule. “Clever” Japanese propaganda, Jaisohn pointed out, had convinced many Americans that Koreans were “on a par with the American Indians” a “weak and spineless” people that could not rule themselves. An information

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The indefatigable Rhee and Henry Chung spearheaded the public relations effort: Rhee went on speaking tours, and Chung wrote and published several books advocating the Korean cause. Both also published numerous pieces in the American press, including the *New York Times*, to parry claims that helpless Koreans were better off under efficient Japanese rule. In March 1919, as anticolonial protests erupted in both Korea and Egypt, the *Times* published an editorial arguing that, while the right of all peoples to self-government was fine in principle, its implementation in practice should depend on evidence that the people in question had the actual “capacity” for self-government. Did not both Egypt and Korea fall under foreign rule in the first place due to the weakness of their “native governments”? Even if the intellectuals of the “upper classes” agitated for self-rule, said the *Times*, they did not really speak for the masses. To this Chung replied that, under oppressive Japanese rule, Koreans would never have a chance to prove their capacity for self-rule. Koreans “of all classes,” he said, were united in their appeal to the Peace Conference and to public opinion in the West for a chance to prove their capacity for self-determination.

Rhee, too, mounted in the American press a spirited defense of Korean fitness for self-government. Replying to an *NYT* op-ed piece by a certain professor, he ridiculed the transparent designs of the “learned Professor” to impugn the capacity of Koreans for self-rule. “No incident is too trivial to suit the Professor’s purpose,” he noted. “He drags in a story of a Korean who, he says, after having fallen into the clutches of a Japanese usurer, squandered some trust money upon a sweetheart. Of course such a thing could never happen in America! But let us strain our imagination and suppose that it did; would any person of sound mind advance that incident in support of the contention that the Americans are unfit for self-government?”

The First Korean Congress in Philadelphia lasted three days. During that time, the assembled heard messages from Korean communities in Hawaii and elsewhere celebrating independence as if it had already been attained. They discussed various appeals to world opinion, including one to the “thinking people of Japan,” and they heard supportive speeches from a number of non-Korean professors and religious leaders, including Rabbi Henry Berkowitz of Philadelphia, who spoke eloquently of how the Jewish heart rejected oppression everywhere. The gathering culminated with the delegates marching through the city streets, brandishing Korean and American flags, to Philadelphia’s Independence Hall. There they heard a presentation from the site’s curator explaining its significance in American history as the location of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Syngman Rhee then ceremoniously read out the text of the Korean Declaration of Independence. As they exited the hall, each delegate walked by the Liberty Bell and touched it reverently with his right hand. Before leaving, Rhee had his photograph taken sitting in the chair from which George Washington presided over the Constitutional Convention 132 years before. The symbolism was unmistakable: the Korean movement against colonial rule was akin to, and drew inspiration and legitimacy from, the history and ideals of the United States.

### **Representing Korea in Paris**

Meanwhile, with Rhee and Chung stranded on the other side of the Atlantic, Kim Kyusik remained the only official Korean representative in Paris. His instructions were to seek interviews with peace delegates and other influential men in Paris, explain the dire condition of Korea under Japanese rule, and convince them that an independent Korea was the key to lasting peace in the Far East. A document he carried with him from Shanghai laid out ten reasons why Korea should be liberated, putting Korean claims in a broader context: “If the allies have restored the Czecho-Slavs to independence after so

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Kim worked diligently in Paris to carry out his instructions. Immediately upon arrival he established a Korean Information Bureau to compile and distribute press summaries of events in Korea to help propagate the cause of independence. But public opinion would not suffice; concrete political support from the power brokers in Paris was needed if Japan was to be made to disgorge Korea. Approaching the American delegation directly, he sought out Captain Stephen Bonsal, a close aide to Wilson and his adviser Colonel House, who had served in Korea as a diplomat and knew it well. Bonsal met with Kim and was sympathetic to his plea, but when he brought the issue up with House the colonel replied that Korea would not be discussed at the conference: "if we attempt too much we may fail to accomplish anything." House did hold out some hope, however: "perhaps later," he said, the League of Nations "will be able to curb Japan when it has less pressing matters nearer at hand to deal with." When Bonsal relayed this reply back to Kim, the young Korean took the news well and appeared confident that his case would eventually be heard by the League. His optimism was, of course, misplaced: the Korean question would never come before the League, and the issue turned moot when Japan withdrew from the League in 1933 after its occupation of Manchuria was condemned.

Unable to enlist official American support, Kim nevertheless petitioned the peace conference to recognize the right of Koreans to be liberated from Japan. Kim sent copies of his petition, with personal cover letters, to the leaders of the major Western powers. In his letter to Wilson, he drew the president's attention to the Japanese hostility toward Christianity in Korea, and hoped to "tempt" Wilson's "intellectual curiosity" by describing Japan's aim of using Korea as a base to dominate China and turn the Pacific into a "Japanese lake." This combination of religious and strategic appeal, Kim clearly hoped, would prove effective with the pious American leader. Like other Korean petitions, however, and for that matter like the petitions of dozens of other of oppressed and stateless peoples at the time, it almost certainly never arrived in Wilson's hands, though the president's private secretary, Gilbert Close, wrote back politely to say that it had been "called to the attention" of the president.

Kim departed from Paris that summer, having failed in his mission to bring the Korean claims to the peace table. In his final meeting with his friend Bonsal he meditated on the irony and injustice of the moment. The Japanese, he said, who learned the ways of civilization from Korea, have now been embraced by the world as a great power, while Korea was utterly submerged and excluded. "How can anyone in his sense," he told Bonsal, "imagine that these swashbucklers will help to make the world safe for democracy?"

## **"Not Even One of the 14 Wilsonian Promises Is Realized"**

By late summer, as the focus of American debate about the postwar settlement shifted from Paris to the U.S. Senate, Korean activists, along with Chinese, Indians, Egyptians, and others, strove to have their case heard there. The results, however, were meager. A number of sympathetic senators did table resolutions calling for such a hearing, but they were buried in committees. In the course of the heated debate, a few senators who opposed the treaty cited reports of Japanese atrocities in Korea to prove that Japan could not be trusted, and the concessions made to it in the treaty contradicted Wilson's claims to be fighting for world democracy, self-determination, and civilization. But these critics were motivated more by their enmity toward Wilson and Japan rather than any effective sympathy for Korea. Korean activists in the United States and their missionary supporters continued the efforts to have their case heard into the 1920s, but they would have precious little success. The Provisional Government continued to exist, if only in form; lying dormant for most of the interwar years, some of its principals would reemerge during the Second World War to demand recognition from the U.S. government and the United Nations Conference in 1945. After the Allied victory in 1945, several of the leading figures of 1919, including Kim and Rhee, would return to play central roles in the competing regimes set up under the occupying powers.



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Though ignored by the powerful in Paris and Washington, the Korean struggle in 1919 did not go unnoticed elsewhere. Among other things, it served as an inspiration to the Chinese students and intellectuals who launched the May Fourth movement shortly thereafter. Prominent intellectual Chen Duxiu, a central figure in May Fourth and later a co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party, called the events in Korea “grand, sincere, and tragic,” and lamented, before the eruption of the May Fourth protests, that with “this glory manifesting in the Korean race, the embarrassment of the decay of the Chinese race is all the more apparent.” And a student activist in China, writing that summer, surveyed the recent hopes and disappointments of oppressed peoples everywhere: not only Chinese, but also Indians and Koreans, he wrote, were simply ignored by the Peace Conference. “So much for national self-determination!” Exclaimed the student, whose name was Mao Zedong, in anger: “I think it is really shameful!”

The March First movement failed to achieve its goals of international recognition and independence for Korea, but it transformed the nature and scope of the Korean national movement. In the spring of 1919, even as the Japanese and other imperialists denounced the “empty slogan of self-determination,” Koreans, like many others across the colonial world, adopted it as their own and mobilized *en masse* for self-determination at home and abroad. As the Wilsonian moment faded, colonial nationalists remained committed to self-determination, and embarked on a search for alternative roads to that goal.

The young Mao wrote that summer that, though Wilson and his ideals stood defeated, there was another force on the rise in Asia: Bolshevism, he said, had made headway in India and Korea, spreading revolution. By the following year Mao had converted to communism as the path to Chinese self-determination, around the same time that the young Ho Chi Minh and the Indian revolutionary M. N. Roy—both of whom had composed impassioned pleas to Wilson not long before—also turned to communist internationalism to seek success where Wilson’s liberal internationalism had failed. A memorandum submitted by Korean delegates at the conference of the Second International in Lucerne in August 1919 stated the matter plainly: “Not even one of the 14 Wilsonian promises is realized. It is then quite natural that the oppressed peoples should stretch their hands to us socialists for help.” In the Korean case, of course, and also in China, the consequences of the growing split between those who continued to look to America and those who put their faith in the Soviet Union would have especially tragic results, leading eventually, in both countries, to civil war and partition.

## **Conclusion**

On August 6, 1919, shortly before he left Paris, Kim Kyusik threw a banquet for friends and supporters of the Korean cause at the Foreign Press Association quarters on the Champs Élysées. In his keynote address before an audience of diplomats and correspondents from France, Britain, Italy, the United States and China, Kim told his audience that Koreans have taken to heart the declarations of Allied statesmen calling to uphold principles of “liberty, Justice, the rights of the peoples.” President Wilson, he noted, described the treaty recently concluded at Versailles as one that guarantees that peoples “will no longer be subjected to the domination and exploitation of a stronger nation.” The people of Korea wished to be included in that process, he said, and aspired to become part of the “family of nations of the world.”

This aspiration would remain the guiding goal of the Korean national movement, despite the divisions that soon appeared between Right and Left, gradualists and militants. It was not, of course, an entirely new notion, and its roots went at least as far back as the Independence Club episode of 1896-1898. The Wilsonian moment, however, saw a far broader and more sustained campaign, international in its scope and vision and emphasizing appeals to “world opinion” as a crucial part of the Korean struggle. The Wilsonian moment shaped the timing and content of the March First Declaration of Independence; it helped mobilize the broad Korean masses against Japanese rule; and precipitated the establishment of the Provisional Government of Korea. Lastly, Korean nationalists at the time relied heavily on Wilsonian rhetoric of self-determination and the

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March First left its mark on the colonial relationship in Korea, prompting the Japanese government, shamed by international criticism, to replace the harsh military rule of 1910-1919 with the more accommodating “cultural policy.” More broadly, it marked “the beginnings of the era of modern nationalism” in Korea and to this day, in rare agreement, it is remembered by Koreans north and south alike as a shining beacon of national awakening and unity. Like the other contemporaneous colonial uprisings in Egypt, India, and China, March First transformed the national movement and shaped its identity and aspirations. Moreover, the impact of the colonial upheavals of the spring of 1919 went far beyond the political realm. Mobilizing broader and more diverse sections of population than ever before, they served as major catalysts, or focal points, of sweeping social and cultural transformations across a wide spectrum of categories of “modernity”. Just one example will have to suffice here, that of gender relations: in Korea, like in Egypt, China, and to some extent India, the spring of 1919 saw women taking a role in public affairs that was wholly unprecedented in its visibility and impact within each of these societies. Nationalism, of course, is not merely a political ideology; it is a broad program of modernization encompassing all aspects of culture and society.

Finally, the Korean experience in 1919 sheds light on the relationship between international events and the development of national movements in the colonial world. The colonial upheavals of 1919, when not ignored by international historians, have typically been explained by the various influences of the war on each society: economic dislocations; or expectations rising from contribution to the war effort (as in India); or the weakening of the Western imperial powers and tarnishing the prestige of Western modernity in the eyes of non-Europeans. Not one of these explanations, however, applies to Korea. It suffered no economic dislocation, played no part in the war, and was ruled by an Eastern power, which emerged more powerful after the war than it had been before it. And yet the Koreans’ view of Woodrow Wilson as the prophet of a new era; the timing and nature of their mobilization in response to global developments; the rhetoric that they adopted; and their disillusionment in the aftermath have striking parallels with other parts of the colonial world. The Korean experience helps show, then, that it was not merely the impact of the war but the emerging discourse of the peace—especially the rapid spread of the principle of self-determination as the bedrock of international legitimacy—that is crucial for understanding the events of 1919 in the colonial world. It was then that anticolonial nationalism began to emerge as a central force that would drive much of the subsequent evolution of international society. The March First movement was part of that process.

## Notes